

Women in Active Combat Roles

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The staff sergeant ordered Blais to fire on anyone with a weapon. Less than two minutes later, Blais spotted a male Iraqi about 400 meters away. He was wearing a white robe and carrying an AK-47 as he ran from the one lone house to the other houses. 'There's someone there,' Blais yelled to the staff sergeant. It was Blais's first time firing at someone. She was scared. She didn't want to take out a random person. 'Shoot,' the staff sergeant yelled back. Without hesitation, Blais fired two shots, hitting her target in the right leg. His leg jerked and he fell. The AK-47 landed a short distance away. The Iraqi started crawling toward his weapon. 'Finish it,' the staff sergeant yelled. Blais fired two more shots. The Iraqi stopped moving as his white robe turned red.¹

The female Marine above is attached to an all-male combat unit. Her primary duty while attached is to search female indigenous personnel that the unit encounters. However, she gets placed in a position where she will be exposed to hostile fire and contact with the enemy. She is forced to defend herself in a manner that is equivalent to serving in a combat MOS by engaging that threat.

Despite the fact that women are exposed to combat scenarios every day, the United States military is not ready for full acceptance of women into combat arms jobs. Many combat units can not continue to operate effectively with the integration of women. Units that transition from all-male to an integrated personnel roster often experience challenges and issues because of their new females.

¹Holmstedt, Kirsten (2007). *Band of Sisters: American Women at War in Iraq*. Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, p.20.

Therefore, before women are granted the opportunity to perform in an active combat role, the armed forces must embrace that women can physically handle combat and that units with females can operate as effectively as those without.

Background

In the scenario above, the female is placed in a situation where she must engage the enemy or risk death to herself or others in her unit. She was attached to a Marine combat unit early in the war in Iraq. By almost any standard, the Marine had engaged in a "combat mission". The Department of Defense currently defines "combat mission" as:

A task, together with the purpose, which clearly requires an individual unit, naval vessel or aircraft to individually or collectively seek out, reconnoiter and engage the enemy with the intent to suppress, neutralize, destroy or repeal that enemy.²

The Army's current definition of combat is as follows:

Direct combat takes place while closing with enemy by fire, maneuver, or shock effect in order to destroy or capture, or while repelling assault by fire, close combat, or counterattack.³

² Center for Military Readiness. (2004 November 18). Women in Land Combat: Selected Findings- 1992 Presidential Commission. Retrieved October 30, 2008, from <http://www.cmrlink.org/WomenInCombat.asp?docID=233>

³ Center for Military Readiness. (2004 November 18). Women in Land Combat: Selected Findings- 1992 Presidential Commission. Retrieved October 30, 2008, from <http://www.cmrlink.org/WomenInCombat.asp?docID=233>

These definitions include premises that cover the contemporary operating environment and all Soldiers and Marines who leaves the safety of a military installation in a combat zone, regardless of MOS. The clause "while repelling assault by fire" includes all non-combat arms MOSs that conduct operations outside of a secure area if they are expected to defend against any sort of enemy attack.

Military police (MP) and combat engineers are included in the group who are routinely engaged by the enemy. For example, in Iraq on a daily basis, MP units leave the security of the Forward Operating Base (FOB) to conduct training missions with Iraqi Police (IP). These missions include traveling to Iraqi bases to link up with the IP. While traveling, the MPs defend against enemy ambushes and contact with improvised explosive devices. These MOSs that conduct these missions are open to females. Therefore, it can be shown that women are experiencing combat regardless of their stated prohibition in DOD policy.

The MP units performing these "combat" missions overcome the potential problems presented by women in combat units. These units show that the issues of women not being able to physically handle combat due to perceived physical fitness shortcomings or extra hygiene necessities

can be solved. Additionally they prove that any cohesion problems that affect unit effectiveness are surmountable. Units like the military police units training Iraqis show that it is possible to integrate women into combat roles.

Physical Demands of Combat

In an attempt to prepare Soldiers for combat, the Army has implemented a physical training program and evaluation that sets a standard that must be attained to effectively handle combat. A simple fact exists that some women are capable of passing the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) on the male scale. If women can achieve the male standard and males are allowed to serve in combat MOSs, then the women who meet the male standard should be allowed to serve in combat.

For the APFT, the female scale runs up to a maximum raw score of 50 push-ups, 82 sit-ups, and 15:36 on the 2-mile run. A female Soldier who attains this mark does quite well by the male standard. On the male scale, these scores translate to 72 points on the push-ups, 100 points on the sit-ups, and 64 points on the 2-mile run. This renders a combined score of 236. There are male Soldiers serving in combat that achieve this score. A Soldier in any MOS is entitled to continue to serve if he or she meets the physical requirements for the Army. If this test is

the acceptable standard, and females are producing scores well within the range for males, then it stands to argue that females can perform physically in combat.

Counter-Argument

Despite the overlap of scores on the APFT scales, it can still be argued that this evaluation is not an accurate gauge of the physical requirements needed for combat.

Common arguments are that Soldiers are not required to run 2-miles in combat, rather they will be required to sprint from one piece of cover to another; or that combat requires more heavy lifting and the push-up does not accurately test this physical necessity.

In an attempt to solve the problem of adequately and correctly preparing for combat, the Marine Corps has introduced the Combat Fitness Test (CFT). The Corps has identified several components of physical fitness that more accurately mirror combat and constructed an evaluation that tests these elements. This test consists of an 800-meter sprint, 30-pound over the head ammunition can press, and running an obstacle course with sprints, buddy carries, and ammunition can carries.⁴

⁴ U.S. Marine Corps. ALMAR 032/08, CHANGES TO THE MARINE CORPS PHYSICAL FITNESS PROGRAM, 2008 August 11. Washington, D.C., Headquarters United States Marine Corps.

However, this test is still in its implementation phase for the Marine Corps. The Army also needs to follow suite. Female Soldiers will demonstrate the ability to handle combat after being assessed by a tool that is better at assessing who should be in combat than the outdated APFT. Since neither the Marine Corps nor the Army has fully implemented a CFT, they should delay full integration of women into combat arms. Once the tests are in place, the military will know who can physically handle combat and who should be in combat MOSs.

Hygiene Considerations

Another area that is a consideration for allowing women to participate in an active combat role is female hygiene. Women can operate in the field with few or no shower facilities. The Army has addressed certain hygiene questions in its *A Guide to Female Soldier Readiness*:

The field environment presents some special considerations, particularly for the female Soldier. However, if approached proactively, these considerations will have a limited impact on the mission of the unit.⁵

In an effort to ensure that the mission is successful, the Army set forth the guide that Soldiers, not just female

⁵ U.S. Army. TG 281 A Guide to Female Soldier Readiness, 2007 January. Washington, D.C., Headquarters, Department of the Army.

Soldiers, should bathe "at least once every week for good hygiene."⁶

Counter-Argument

An argument may be presented that women must deal with their menstrual cycle while training. By the very nature of this event, women are more vulnerable to diseases. In a more sterile environment this is no longer a concern. This environment cannot always be provided while operating in the field, away from bathing facilities.

A Guide for Female Soldier Readiness also addresses this scenario. A field expedient bath with as little as one canteen of water provides enough daily sanitation for women who are menstruating while in the field, according to the Army publication.⁷ This bathing procedure, dubbed a "bird bath", is a simple one where Soldiers focus cleanliness on areas that are particularly susceptible to disease.

The idea that the above outlined process is enough hygiene for women in the field is not well-known throughout the Army. This ignorance can and is used by both sexes as an excuse why women should not be integrated into combat

⁶ U.S. Army. FM 21-20 Physical Fitness Training (Change 1), 1998 October 1. Washington, D.C., Headquarters, Department of the Army.

⁷ U.S. Army. TG 281 A Guide to Female Soldier Readiness, 2007 January. Washington, D.C., Headquarters, Department of the Army.

units. However, once this misconception is broken throughout the Army, the women can effectively be blended into the units that engage in active ground combat.

Unit Cohesion

Military organizations have the ability to operate effectively with women integrated into them. According to the rules of group dynamics, a well-balanced unit should represent all sects within a group of people to maximize its success potential.⁸ Groups with constituents who potentially cause levels of dissonance often are more effective than their counterpart organizations bereft of these personnel. The most productive organizations are the ones that embrace these people who, despite their often contrary views, contribute and cause the group to grow and excel.

Counter-Argument

However, a commonly held belief within the Army is that gender integrated units will always be more prone to cohesion problems. The argument exists that female Soldiers impede on cohesion and bonding if they are introduced in a male unit. Rosen and Martin stated in

⁸Peck, M.S. 1987. *The Different Drum: Community-Making and Peace*. New York: Simon and Schuster. Referenced through Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Group_dynamics.

their article *Sexual Harassment, Cohesion, and Combat Readiness in U.S. Army Support Units*,

While some studies have suggested that women's presence does not affect unit cohesion or unit effectiveness, a study conducted in 1988 found that a higher percentage of women in the work group was negatively correlated with male horizontal cohesion⁹, as well as acceptance of women and combat readiness among male junior enlisted soldiers in combat service support units.¹⁰

Although Rosen and Martin make this conclusion, they conducted their studies prior to 1988. The representation of women in the Army was very low at this time. Even by 2006, the percentage of women in the Army was still only at 13.7%.¹¹ This number has consistently increased since the transformation of the Army to an all volunteer force in the 1970s, where personnel quotas were no longer filled by any sort of all-male draft.

The effect of having a higher percentage of women in the Army will help to stabilize the cohesion problems

⁹ Horizontal cohesion is the bonding that occurs within members of an exclusive homogenous unit versus vertical cohesion within a hierarchical structure where subordinate leaders identify with senior leaders (i.e. loyalty).

¹⁰ Rosen, L.N., & Martin, L. (1997, Winter). Sexual harassment, cohesion, and combat readiness in U.S. Army support units [Electronic Version]. *Armed Forces and Society*, 24(2), 221-245.

¹¹ (<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0873839.html>).

presented by what Kanter dubs "tokenism",¹² where only a small number of a minority is present in a group. That minority is then treated in a disadvantageous manner. Rosen and Martin address this situation as well: "As women's numbers increase, there is a corresponding increase in their status relative to men, who perceive and treat them more as equals".¹³ Once women represent a higher proportion of the population in the Army, units will re-establish the bonding that occurs in units. This bonding may be different from the all-male bonding that occurs now, but will be no less effective.

Conclusion

The United States armed forces are not completely ready for the changes that are taking place. Soldiers and Marines in all ranks still believe that insurmountable challenges are presented by having women integrated in combat units. The women who are physically capable of handling combat need only a few minor considerations in terms of hygiene to be able to operate in a male unit. The Army and Marine Corps will soon adapt and be able to show

¹² Kanter, R.M. (1977). Some Effects of Proportion on Group Life: Skewed Sex Ratios and Responses to Token Women, *American Journal of Sociology*, 82, 965-990

¹³ Rosen, L.N., & Martin, L. (1997, Winter). Sexual harassment, cohesion, and combat readiness in U.S. Army support units [Electronic Version]. *Armed Forces and Society*, 24(2), 221-245.

that women are indeed qualified to participate in combat from a fitness standpoint. The challenges presented to unit cohesion by having women in combat units can be solved by further integration and development of knowledge throughout the rank structure. These truths can and will be accepted by the Army and Marine Corps as they welcome women more fully into every occupational specialty.

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